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FIGURES IN FRENCH DECORATIVE ART.

By CHARLES M. SKINNER.

ONE hardly needs to visit Europe now-a-days to study the phases of its pictorial art, for Americans are so free-handed in their buying that we have abundant representations of it, while at least half our artists have allied themselves to European schools or European masters. Yet impressions of foreign art are stronger and more accurate when it is studied at first hand, amid surroundings that have been factors in its development, than they can be here, and in decoration the artist certainly gains new and broad ideas from a visit to Europe.

A cursory exploration of foreign galleries, where canvases and frescos of certain periods and schools are massed together, usually results in forming a bias in the traveler's mind, and sometimes in revealing to him the standard of his tastes. A companion with whom I made a European tour went abroad without definite ideas of art, though with a disposition to render homage to old masters, but his acquaintance with those worthies bred in him only an all-embracing dislike.

It is well to have the courage of our convictions, and that, apparently, is not possessed by thousands who make the grand tour and come back prating of the glories of early painters. They make the common mistake of supposing their works to be exhibited for the purpose of eliciting admiration, whereas they simply illustrate the progress of art and oftener show its low beginnings than high ends. There are pictures in the galleries of Holland, Belgium, and Germany that would not be tolerated from the modern tyro; pictures of vomiting drunkards and bestial revelers, pictures filled with coarseness, brutality and vice, too poor in execution to be regarded as art, too vulgar to be regarded as immoral. Yet what a clue they furnish to the state of public taste and morals in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries! We do not have to be told, when looking at these things, that in the time when they were painted obscenity passed for wit, and that intelligence and taste were not diffused except through the one channel of architecture.

The French school seems to me the one school that has completed its history, and to have attained to as high a position, technically considered, as it is likely to attain. English and American art is advancing; German art seems to be in process of change; the art of the Netherlands is retrograde; Belgian pictures are a weak reflex of the French; Italian art has lost its virility; but in France art seems to have ripened and to be in fullest fruitage. Certainly we cannot expect much technical superiority over the paintings of Bougereau, Cabanel, Duran, Meissonier and Gerome to select certain marked individualities of style occurring to mind at the moment, and as to ideals, there is a tendency toward the expression of poetic sentiment and a subversion of subject to the esthetic object that implies the possession of ideals, to say the least. Art of all kinds is but applied nature; therefore ideals must have a basis of reality, and it is better that the painter show us beautiful realities than mock us with flimsy paraphrases.

In decorative subjects Frenchmen seem to speak their fancies best. The old bombastic war scenes that form subjects of wall and ceiling decoration in many a French gallery and palace, where generals in Roman togas and imperial truncheons direct blue-coated and red-legged troops, while Fame and Victory soar through the battle smoke with crowns and swords, are poor expressions of ideals and incoherent renderings of history. Liberal use of personification and allegory in poetry has reconciled us to making believe that Fame, Freedom, Courage and Victory have bodily entity and are entitled to be spelled in capitals, and we are not surprised to learn that Freedom shrieked and that Victory found a slender and unsteady seat on a banner; but when we find these emblematic people floating around a ceiling arrayed in blue and red flannel gowns and sandals and blowing horns above the heads of gentlemen in bag wigs, these occurrences do not jibe with our experience.

The French artist has dropped this kind of thing, and succeeds better with religious and mythical subjects. He invests scriptural topics with much more interest than the Dutch, Flemish and Italian painters did, and in Greek legend is at his best. We have the award of Paris, the birth of Venus, Leda with the swan, Aurora, Apollo, the Graces, Orpheus, the spirits of music, of love, of war, of the woods and waters painted as Zeuxis and Apelles might have painted them,

except that the workmanship is doubtless better than was that of those famous artists.

These subjects, allowing full freedom in coloring and management of figures naturally assume a decorative form. Grace of line, harmony of composition, and vivacity of color are attributes that immediately strike the beholder; the sense of proportion is satisfied, the eye is pleased and the fancy stimulated; few pictures accomplish more.

In representing the nude figure, Frenchmen are confessedly unrivaled, and this intimate knowledge of the form itself makes their work with draped models the more easy and accurate. Greek sculpture is the finest in the world because the naked figure was familiar to the sculptor; he saw it daily, he saw it in its most magnificent development. So with the French; the student familiarizes himself with it, he knows every bone and muscle, and can see every curve and line beneath the drapery, so that his clad figures do not resemble tailors' dummies or things made of clothes, but flesh and blood men and women whose clothes but cover them.

The Frenchman revels in the nude. He delights to paint it, and his work is photographed and sold by thousands of copies in the arcades of the Rue Rivoli. It would be absurd to deny that French art is not, in some measure, an outcome of a national sensuousness, but as regards the vexed question of the moral effect of these pictures, I am compelled to believe them responsible for very little evil.

In the first place, the perfect freedom with which they are exposed meets curiosity half way and thwarts it of such suggestiveness as it might find in an attempt to withdraw them from sight. In the second place, familiarity removes suggestiveness and makes true beauty apparent. Were such pictures as those of the Luxembourg, the annual Salon, and the ceilings of the Louvre exposed in any of our Broadway windows, they would be regarded by many as a scandal on the community, and Anthony Comstock would be thrown into moral convulsions by them; but to Parisians they are as familiar as are patent medicine advertisements to Americans.

They have ceased to have for the French public the charm of forbidden things, and the tourist knows that if, for a few days, such pictures have shocked him, he survives the shock and that in what first impressed him as wantonness he feels a development of beauty. He grows insensible to the animal nature of a picture when he learns to know the mind of it. Charm of pose, delicate contour, luminous color, balance of light and shade, the story of the work, if it has one; these he comes to observe in time, and to respect. He now sees genius where he first saw clever immorality. He finds that if custom and costume have made nature shocking to him only a little familiarity is needed to restore the love and admiration for what is far more beautiful than anything achieved by custom and costume.

To be sure the nude is often rendered coarsely "with malice aforethought," but everybody whose acquaintance with pictures is commensurate with generous culture knows that many representations of nude figures are as void of offence as studies from still life, while clothed figures can indicate quite as much wickedness as the artist desires to exhibit.

The opportunity to educate Americans to this standard of common-sense purity has been lost through the intervention of fanatical laws passed by purchasable representatives from virtuous country districts, and by the efforts of money-making hypocrites who placed a premium upon indecency by advertising it to exist where honest intelligence understands it never for an instant intruded.

Figures enter into the decorative work of French artists to an extent not approached by that of other painters, and the best artists in France have engaged in decoration with finest results. Just now the public buildings of Paris, like the cathedrals of England, are undergoing complete artistic restoration and improvement. In the Pantheon, and in many churches, gorgeous frescos and wall paintings are in progress. In the corridors of the Hotel des Invalides, the eye is arrested by gigantic mural decorations presenting in panoramic form the military history of France from the time of Cæsar's invasion to the departure of the Prussian army from Paris.

The Hotel de Ville presents again the appearance it had before its destruction by the Commune, and has even more statues and interior embellishments than before. The Luxembourg is partly closed for the making of improvements. New frescos are being painted in the School of Fine Arts. In short, that decorated city, the art metropolis of the world, will fairly blaze with color when the painters have finished their work. In nearly every case I observe that the principal

decorations, whether pictorial, sculptured, or molded, are based on the human figure spiritualized as angels, or deified into Greek gods, perchance, but, as regards form, eminently human.

I always doubted the decorative fitness of the figure, and where it has been used in a purely ornamental manner in American public buildings the success has not been general or inspiring, though exceptions like Lafarge's windows and Hunt's lunettes in the Albany capitol are not difficult to find. In private buildings we do better, as witness the graceful designs for parlors, drawing-rooms, and dining-rooms furnished by Edwin Blashfield and A. A. Anderson, whose work, though not imitative, follows the canons of the best French art.

Figures may be treated pictorially in much the same manner as in frescos, and one might cite the works of Baudry, Valadon, Granger, Wagrez, Bougereau, Ruffio, Dupain, Aubert, Henner, Aissandou, Le Roux, and others to prove the effectiveness of such treatment, but the reverse does not always hold true; the manner of painting a ceiling is not that of painting a canvas. The decorator is under limitations respecting size, light, form, and material that the studio painter knows not of.

Where the spaces to be painted present surfaces of stone or plaster, and have the shape of circles, fans, lunettes and triangles, where there are dim lights or cross lights, where a fore-shortened effect is to be guarded against on account of the height of the picture, it is manifest that the decorator cannot proceed with the same ease that he can who works on canvas. But despite the difficulties of this work the men who are beautifying the important buildings of Paris show a command of their art that recalls the frescos of Raphael and Michael Angelo. Their groupings are simple; that is necessary because the fresco is to produce the effect of a picture without its detail. It must satisfy demands for strength, grace, and color, and it must harmonize with the building it decorates, but not pique curiosity too far respecting matters of technique, for such curiosity cannot be satisfied by looking at the work from a distance; the style therefore should be simple, strong, and clear and the composition an approach to the conventional.

The figure must be luminously painted if nude, or richly draped if clothed, else it is not decorative, and must be disposed in a manner to create an impression of strength without effort, and of grace without artifice. If there is effort or artifice the mind becomes conscious of it and shares, in a small degree, the strain put upon the painted figure. In friezes and in long spaces that approach nearer to an observer's level, as in the chapel partitions in the Pantheon, a different treatment of figures is demanded. There the eye cannot receive an immediate impression of the whole but follows the subject from side to side; hence, a processional or panoramic treatment is the better, where figures detach themselves in such groups as can be separately studied, and where the composition is such as to give an effect of movement or of sequence, that will imperceptibly carry the eye forward.

The same simplicity should be observed in friezes and dados as in ceilings, spandrels, and lunettes; the figures should come well forward; there should be nothing in backgrounds to distract attention from them; scroll work and other surroundings should be in lower tones of color than pictured spaces, and present a relative uniformity of tint to throw the pictures into brighter relief.

The introduction of figures into purely conventional decoration where they are painted as statues, reliefs, and so on, should be made with caution, though it is often enough sanctioned. They tend to draw attention from colored spaces that are the decorative nuclei of an interior, while, at the same time, figures in the colors of nature that are placed near them render them dull and uninteresting.

We have much to learn, and Frenchmen can teach us much in art matters, but at our present rate of progress it will not be long ere we shall have galleries befitting the treasures of the world's art that are steadily finding their way hither; theatres and opera houses where a generous *mise en scène* shall not seem at variance with the decoration of the auditorium; public buildings where present tawdry work shall be replaced by designs of dignity and appropriateness; and homes where the charms of domestic life, nowhere more fully exerted than in America, shall be increased and reflected by those things that tend to solace, educate, refine and purify.

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